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# I

T. J. REED

## Mann and history

It is paradoxical that a body of work which begins by being so narrowly preoccupied with problems of the writer's self, and which to the end centres on characters expressing his intimate and unchanged concerns, should also contain so much history. Partly it is a matter of natural growth, the widening range of experience in increasingly turbulent times, which a novelist of all people could hardly ignore; but it also sprang from a remarkable congruence between Thomas Mann's themes and the patterns of twentieth-century German history. His work, with all the traditions, ambitions and temptations that lay behind it, was representative of fundamental German situations and responses before he set out consciously to represent them in fiction. When awareness dawned and representation became deliberate analysis, he was able to represent those phenomena with such depth of insight because he had been so deeply part of them and they of him. We can read him for pleasure, but also for understanding. *Crede experto*: believe the man who has gone through it himself. He can offer, in a word that is central to both Mann's art and his ethics, *Erkenntnis* (a complex concept which embraces knowledge, insight, analysis, understanding). Two of Mann's novels in particular are impressive reports – they are a great deal more than that, but they are that too – on crises of modern history: *The Magic Mountain* of 1924 on pre-1914 Europe and on the conflicts, especially acute in Germany, which were left unresolved by the First World War; and *Doctor Faustus* of 1947 on the long roots of Nazism in German culture and society.

There is already history of a kind in Mann's precocious first masterpiece, the family saga *Buddenbrooks* (1901). The novel preserves in amber the commercial and private lives and attitudes of a German nineteenth-century city state (plainly Lübeck, though only its streets and landmarks are ever mentioned, not its name) and displays them in their full dignity, idiosyncrasy and sometimes tragedy. From the grand scenic opening where the city's merchant class and their professional friends gather for a lavish Buddenbrook house-warming, down through four generations of the family and all their

vicissitudes to a final bleak scene where only spinsters, divorcees and a widow are left, everything Mann narrates and describes is concretely characteristic of its time and place: the place he knew as the scene of his early years, and the times he had heard tell of or could be informed about by his older relatives.

Recording history was not, however, Mann's aim. He drew on the rich materials to hand for quite different purposes. *Buddenbrooks* is a history of decline and rise: the decline of the family's old vitality and outward standing (the 'Verfall' of the subtitle), and the rise (nowhere so precisely labelled) of inward qualities – intellect, artistic sensibility, creative potential. These new and subtler strengths did not necessarily follow from the waning of vitality, but it seemed in some mysterious way to be their cause when they did arise. That, at any rate, was a common perception of the period; in the wake of Darwin and Nietzsche and their popularisers, heredity and decadence were common coin in the cultural debates of the 1890s. Nietzsche gave the terms a deeply ambivalent sense, decrying mankind's loss of healthy primitive instincts, yet at the same time recognising that the human animal only became 'interesting' when 'sick', that is to say, when instinct had been tamed and transformed into spiritual systems, however perverse.<sup>1</sup> So the thesis of decline and its problematic compensation is itself a piece of history that Mann's first novel enshrines. If the idea was not original, it certainly seemed to fit his own case as an artist sprung from an old merchant line. In *Buddenbrooks*, under the narrative's social surface, he was writing the history of his own talent. The novel grew indeed from the idea for a novella wholly devoted to a sensitive latecomer, a last-generation figure. This would not have been very different from other early stories of Mann's about suffering outsiders. They are all set in the present, with no space for more than a gesture towards causal explanation – accident, illness, mixed parentage. The novel form, in contrast, gave Mann room to show how this human type gradually came about. But the family's genetic history inheres in and interacts with social history. Tracing that inner history down through time by subtle hints and touches, the novel also registers external changes as it goes along, not least the hardening of an older commercial tradition into more hard-nosed business practice. These things compose a varied historical reality which is part of the novel's triumph and a large part of its readers' pleasure. This was not, for Thomas Mann, its point. It is symptomatic that as significant an event as Europe's 1848 revolutions is treated in an offhand, if beguilingly humorous way (1, 181–94; Part 4, Chapter 3).

*Buddenbrooks* remains Mann's one large social canvas. Though his interest in society and the political forces that shape it later became intense, he never again treated social reality head-on on such a scale. That approach

belonged to a nineteenth-century realist tradition he had left behind, having just this once used its means for his own ends. It is ironic that his fullest portrayal of society was achieved, and in masterly fashion, when he was least concerned with it for its own sake.

Elsewhere in Mann's early work up to 1914, society is presented unambiguously as the outsider's antithesis and sometimes his antagonist. Society and its members have something he lacks: an unthinking normality and order, what in *Tonio Kröger* (1903) is called a 'seductive banality' (VIII, 302). For the excluded or self-excluding outsider, the 'joys of ordinariness' (ibid.) become an object of yearning. Mann, like Kröger, idealises its fair-haired, blue-eyed representatives. In another mood he pillories its less ideal embodiments, like Herr Klöterjahn and his alarmingly robust baby son in 'Tristan' (also 1903). Yet whether it is soft-focus idealisation or the sharp outlines of satire, these emblematic figures are ultimately biological rather than social types, animals living out their unimpaired vitality, as the figure of the infant Klöterjahn makes clear. Behind ideal and satire is a single reality; they are the contrasting faces of the life-force. As Mann later half-ruefully said, the leitmotif of blondness in his ideal figures was a harmless remnant of the 'blond beast', the vitality-symbol Nietzsche had set against modern decadence (XI, 110). Nietzschean vitalism is constantly present behind the young Thomas Mann's judgements and self-judgements.

Both the finished works and the unfinished projects of the years between *Buddenbrooks* and the First World War show the same inward-looking focus that scarcely engages the outside world. On the face of it, Mann's second novel, *Royal Highness* (1909), is a romantic comedy in which the prince of a small Ruritanian state saves its fortunes by marrying one. Mann had just consolidated his own fortunes by a good marriage. Private reference does not stop there. The tale's point is the allegorical equation of prince and artist: both are purely 'formal' existences, with no real function in society. Ruritania likewise has no real history. This slight idea is worked out over some 350 pages, a mass that did not prevent critics finding it too light from the author of *Buddenbrooks*. Mann did soon afterwards plan a novel about a prince of quite another calibre, Frederick the Great, which would have offered real historical substance and demanded a quite different treatment, but it came to nothing. The writer's points of contact with the subject were too limited and self-referential: the King's ascetic self-discipline and heroic 'ethos of achievement' (i.e. yet more of the prince-writer parallel), and perhaps the homosexuality common to them both.

A second project that seemed to promise and demand substance was the novel 'Maya', conceived as a tapestry of Munich society, a kind of Bavarian *Buddenbrooks*, though with a more calculated philosophical theme:

social 'reality' as a veil of illusion, for which 'maya' is the Buddhist and Schopenhauerian term. Moreover, the central interest, as the surviving work-notes show, is the fictional projection of Mann's intense relationship with his painter friend Paul Ehrenberg, to which society functions as an episodic background. This plan too came to nothing, though four decades later Mann set some of its episodes, with their now historical patina, in the narrative of *Doctor Faustus*.

One aspect of Munich did achieve brief but brilliant realisation in a finished work. The short story 'Gladius Dei' (1902) satirises the Bavarian capital as a reproduction Renaissance Florence: it too is devoted to a cult of visual art that refuses to look into the depths of suffering beneath life's beautiful surface. To complete the parallel, a monkishly costumed outsider rails against the city's wicked sensuality like some grotesque latter-day Savonarola. These echoes from the past serve the very specific protest of a displaced person from Lübeck whose own more probing and compassionate literary art is neglected by Munich in favour of the fashionable visual genre. Mann also treated the theme in its original period in a costume-drama, *Fiorenza* (1905). Despite the added historical distance, the message sounds more vehement, the identification with Savonarola's vengeful will to power is more patent, when narrative detachment is replaced by direct dialogue. The bite of the short story is lost in wordiness; what is left, as the theatre critic Alfred Kerr cuttingly wrote, is so much dutifully read-up Renaissance.<sup>2</sup>

The satire on modern Munich is linked with Mann's other main uncompleted project of these doldrum years, the essay 'Intellect and Art'. As the extensive work-notes show, this was to be a major treatise taking issue with the state of German culture around 1910: literature, theatre, music, art, crafts; trends and attitudes, fads, fashions and influences; major figures of the present (Max Reinhardt, Stefan George, Richard Strauss) and of the recent past (Nietzsche, Wagner); and some ancestral voices (Lessing, Goethe, Schiller, the Romantics) prophesying modernity.<sup>3</sup> The tone is critical, at times polemical, for in all the observed phenomena Mann made out something deeply inimical to his own art: a new wave of taste for the unproblematic beauty of modern (but not too modern!) visual art and music, and a rejection of analysis, social criticism, pathology and decadence – in short, of everything the writers of his generation had concentrated on.<sup>4</sup> The anti-literary trend he had first spotted in Munich now seemed to him an anti-intellectualism pervading German culture. As he was very much an intellectual writer, the new spirit was a threat to his values, hence to his popularity and so in the most practical sense to his career. Personal concerns again, then – but through the lens of the private he was at least starting to perceive external change. If he had completed the essay, it would have been a historical document



(even the work-notes, in their rough form, are that) and perhaps a compelling historical diagnosis of society and culture around 1910.

The trouble was, where did he really stand? Was he committed to being only ever the cool analytic mind, the intellectual writer? Other kinds of literature were possible, and rising – writing that aimed to be fresh and unproblematic, healthy and poetic, ‘Plastik’ rather than ‘Kritik’, celebrating life in the way visual art was currently assumed to do. New writers were coming along to challenge the old. Some of his own generation – Gerhart Hauptmann, Hugo von Hofmannsthal – seemed to be adapting so as not to miss the bus. Should he polemicise against all this, and thereby publicly set himself against his times? Or should he follow suit and emphasise anything in his own work that was healthy? It was a classic case of beat them or join them. Mann was torn. The self-concern that was too narrow to base substantial novels on was also too uncertain of its direction to allow a clear public statement. The essay too was duly aborted.

Working on this project had involved looking in breadth at current social phenomena, and looking back in time at their historical roots. This was of course only literary and cultural history. Only? There is no clear dividing line between the merely cultural and the allegedly more real forces that make history. It was to be a key element of Mann’s later *Erkenntnis* that every cultural or intellectual attitude is latently political: ‘in jeder geistigen Haltung ist das Politische latent’ (x, 267). Certainly in Germany, so he would write after the German catastrophe, ‘das Seelische’ – spiritual, cultural, emotional impulse – was the prime moving force, and political action only came after, as its expression and instrument (vi, 408).<sup>5</sup> These were truths derived from his own past, as well as from wider experience.

*Death in Venice* (1912) has a place in history in two distinct ways. In social terms, as a classic of homosexual passion which yet makes enough show of moral judgement not to seem a direct plea or cause a public scandal, and which has been made into a film and an opera with a prestige of their own, it has probably done more to edge homosexuality into the common culture than any other single work of art. The remark of Mann’s old enemy Alfred Kerr, that the story ‘made pederasty acceptable to the cultivated middle classes’, was meant to be sarcastic but has proved prophetic.<sup>6</sup>

The novella has, secondly, something to say about political history, even though the sole mention of the public sphere is the threat of war in its opening sentence – the truncated date ‘19..’ could refer to any one of several pre-1914 crises. Otherwise the themes are internal, first artistic, then emotional, and the hidden depths are moral and psychological. With his artistic discipline collapsing, Aschenbach travels to refresh his creative system, but instinctively is seeking a deeper release (as witness the alarming jungle vision of

Chapter 1). In Nietzschean terms, Dionysus is reasserting his power against too harsh a rule of Apollo; in Freudian terms, it is a revolt against repression. Mann was consciously using Nietzsche, but probably did not yet know Freud; on this his own accounts vary. The Polish boy's beauty does, briefly, inspire new writing, but then becomes an obsession overcoming all rational self-control (as witness Aschenbach's dream-vision of a Dionysian orgy in Chapter 5).

The issues become political only if the collapse of a disciplined individual life is read as a symbol of forces waiting to be unleashed in society. Georg Lukács was the first to see this angle, albeit by trial and error, first stressing Aschenbach's Prussian discipline. 'Prussianism' is an old bogeyman for historians of Germany, not because of any breakdown, however, but because of its ruthless persistence: Wilhelm II's provocation of crises until one of them led to war; the increasing Prussian military control of policy during 1914–18; Hindenburg's selling out of the fragile Weimar democracy to Hitler in 1933; the Wehrmacht general staff holding the candle to the devil of Nazism through the thirties and forties, until the belated conspiracy of a group of officers which nearly killed Hitler. What really matters, as Lukács eventually sees, is not the old Prussian discipline, but the emotional and social forces whose tool it increasingly became, the 'barbaric underworld' which the Venice novella suggests is lurking under the surface of an ordered life or, by implication, of an ordered society.<sup>7</sup> Even that stops short of Mann's own later insight. The solutions to his artistic difficulties that Aschenbach casts around for – rejecting the psychological analysis and understanding he practised in his early work, simplifying morality, abandoning himself to the dark emotions he no longer even wants to control – these things would later strike Thomas Mann, in exile from Nazi Germany, as a clear proto-fascist syndrome. The emotional nexus had taken on political form in the Nazis' violent attacks on reason and intellect, the whipping up of atavistic mass feeling, the collective unreason of enthusiasm for Hitler. Insofar as Aschenbach's problems and temptations had been Mann's own – 'I had these things in me as much as anyone', he wrote to his American patroness Agnes E. Meyer on 30 May 1938 – he shuddered to think he had embodied the coming politics of the age.

The 'socially responsible Apolline narrative'<sup>8</sup> that eventually takes over *Death in Venice* and consigns Aschenbach to a tragic death had not disposed of the potential for atavistic feeling in Mann himself. Within two years, the war that looms in that opening sentence had broken out and Mann was carried away, like most intellectuals in the combatant nations, by the nationalistic emotions of August 1914. Where Mann-Aschenbach's Venetian 'visitation' ('Heimsuchung') by homoerotic passion had been kept in moral

check, this new and larger one could be welcomed and embraced. Mann uses the word 'visitation' again prominently in 'Thoughts in War', the article with which in 1914 he leaped to defend his country against the accusations of Entente propaganda: that Germany had provoked and begun hostilities, had flouted morality and broken international law by invading France via neutral Belgium, and was now committing atrocities. Such charges made much of the contrast between the true Germany of culture (Beethoven, Kant, Goethe) and the new Germany of ruthless *Realpolitik* (Nietzsche, Treitschke, the politicians and generals round Kaiser Wilhelm). Mann denied this distinction: true culture was compatible with and in touch with the terrible realities of life; all else was shallow or feigned, mere Western 'civilisation'. In *Frederick and the Grand Coalition* (1915) he drew a parallel with Prussian history: however 'enlightened' the philosopher-prince had been before acceding, the soldier-king was right to be ruthless once he was on the throne. Prussia's destiny was at stake, the outcome justified him. The same applied to Germany now – or, come to think of it (and he clearly did), to Thomas Mann's own transformation.

With these two pieces early in the war, Mann might have shot his political bolt, if his brother Heinrich – an increasingly radical left-wing writer, and now an outspoken critic of German actions – had not countered with his own historical parallel. Heinrich's essay 'Zola' celebrates the French novelist's political commitment, especially to the anti-militarist cause in the notorious Dreyfus affair. More generally, it is about the moral demands on writers in a sabre-rattling society like the French Third Republic and then, back to specifics, it uses personal allusions nobody else would recognise to condemn Thomas's own moral failure and corruption as a writer who has gone along with the sabre-rattlers of the Wilhelmine Second Empire. A long-smouldering conflict between the brothers was now flaring openly.

There were, however, no more exchanges of public rhetoric. Instead, deeply wounded, Thomas withdrew into a long, brooding examination of the essential, 'unpolitical' Germany and its necessary conflict with the political West; also of himself as a writer who, for all his intellectuality and enlightened modern views, had secret roots in that German essence. In a clear-sighted retrospect, he reads Tonio Kröger's nostalgic wish to preserve the innocent world of Hans Hansen against the influence of literature and intellect (i.e. against himself) as instinctive political conservatism (xii, 586, quoting viii, 303). Yet the title of the enormous book that came out of these broodings was *Reflections of an Unpolitical Man*. The title was both accurate and inaccurate. On the one hand, Mann's image of Wilhelmine Germany, of how it got into the war and of what was at stake, was seriously out of touch with realities, as he later acknowledged. His antithesis of Germany and

'Western' civilisation was old polemical stock stretching back to the German Romantics, born of the humiliating defeat by Napoleon in 1806 and of the long frustration of German hopes to become a nation-state and not just a 'cultural nation'. The book was also unpolitical in being too long and too late to affect any debate that now mattered: much of its content had been overtaken by events, the war was already lost when it was published. Not for nothing did nineteenth-century laws dispense books over twenty printer's sheets in length from censorship: anything that long must have fallen behind the burning issues of the day. On the other hand, Mann's position was deeply political in two senses: first, any defence of the status quo, however allegedly unpolitical, is in practice political conservatism, as he recognised by quoting that *Tonio Kröger* passage; secondly, if enough people hold a view, however out of touch with realities, it becomes itself a political factor. Mann was far from alone in his kind of conservatism. It was to be a major factor in the politics of the Weimar Republic.

In 1918 Thomas Mann found himself among the losers, the more embittered because he saw his brother among the winners. Heinrich denied any triumphalism, but his satirical novel *Der Untertan* [The (Kaiser's) Subject], blocked by censorship in 1914, could now be published and widely acclaimed as the historical truth about Wilhelmine Germany: that it had been a society of conformists replicating from top to bottom the Kaiser's arrogant attitudes. Now the Kaiser had gone and a democratic republic had come – just the development the unpolitical Mann had feared. Faced with historical change on that scale, he retired hurt and wrote two idylls, both published in 1919. *Master and Dog*, begun in the last weeks of the war, was a prose sketch of the relationship with Mann's best friend; there followed, of all things, a poem in hexameters, *A Birth and a Christening*, about his new baby daughter. These minor pieces were a strange response to events: walks with his dog Bauschan on the banks of the Isar were no distance from political upheaval, and hexameters made an odd counterpoint to the machine-gun fire audible across Munich as a Soviet-style *Räterepublik* was first established and then overthrown. Mann was taking refuge in the small area of everyday stability the times had left.

He emerged from this spiritual retreat in 1920 to take up the fiction abandoned under the stress of war in 1915, *The Magic Mountain*. He had begun it in 1912 as a novella, a companion-piece to *Death in Venice*: after the tragic destruction of a great writer's ordered life, the comic break-up of a banal bourgeois existence – this time the central figure was one of those normal blond-haired young northerners. For was there really such a thing as normality? Hans Castorp was to be disoriented and undone, like Aschenbach, by the forces of Eros and illness. The setting was a Swiss tuberculosis sanatorium

full of characters and caricatures from almost every European nation, where Castorp only ever meant to visit his cousin but stays on as a patient. High on the Mountain, he would learn deeper truths than are dreamt of in the Flatland's philosophy. The coming of war in 1914 force-fed the planned short work with topical meanings. Those deeper truths would now be the ones Germany was, in Mann's view, fighting for. The Mountain would be the moral and cultural high ground where the views of an Italian liberal, akin to brother Heinrich's 'Western' views, would be answered by a German pastor. Clearly the ending must now be the outbreak of war. Since Germany at that early stage seemed to be winning, this would have been historic confirmation of the rightness of the Mountain and its lessons.

But Germany had now lost the war, leaving the Mountain's lessons no longer backed by history. Or had history made a mistake? Either way, the novel's conception seemed hopelessly dated. Mann began to write again with no clear sense of direction. His political attitudes were meantime as much in turmoil as the politics of post-1918 Europe. His diary shows him toying with everything from a dissolution of the present German state and an eventual new Pan-Germany, to a communist Danube federation of Bavaria, Austria and Hungary. In practice he cast his vote for the conservative Bavarian Deutsche Volkspartei (diary, 12 January 1919); and he was openly relieved when the anti-revolutionary forces of General Epp put a violent end to the Munich republican experiment (diary, 7 May 1919).

Violence of a different kind broke into Mann's post-war waverings and resentments almost as dramatically as 1914 had activated his latent nationalism. Political opposition in the Weimar Republic early took the extreme form of political assassination. The murder of the Foreign Minister Walther Rathenau in 1922 was not the first such act, but it was what changed Mann's allegiance.<sup>9</sup> He now concluded that the Republic, however 'un-German' in origin (it was widely felt to have been imposed by the victors, and its constitution had been drawn up by a Jewish jurist), must be supported against subversion and filled as far as possible with German cultural values, so that Germans would willingly embrace it. Mann took that unpopular stand in a Munich speech of the same year, 'On the German Republic'. It was a startling change. If his wartime stand had come as a shock to those who thought him a liberal intellectual, his new position was an equal shock to those who had come to rely on him as a conservative nationalist. He was back roughly where he had started.

Mann's changed political position inevitably began to reshape the novel – its inner meaning, that is, for the outward narrative shape stayed as it was: the Mountain, the hero's educative disorientation through disease and love, the arguments between a liberal and a conservative, the outbreak of war

in 1914 as the end of the story. But the point of the education was now to inculcate the balance and tolerance needed in a new political world; the arguments would point in a different direction; the war's end would open, not foreclose the large questions. The novel also began to grow inordinately. Back in 1917 Mann had said that writing the *Reflections* was vital if the novel was not to be overloaded (to Paul Amann, 25 March 1917). Now that the issues argued out in the *Reflections* were being rethought, he brought back his more extreme wartime and post-war notions and put them in the mouth of the conservative debater, no longer the German Pastor Bunge but a more disturbingly extreme figure, a Jesuit with leanings towards communism. In this bizarre mixture (gratuitously complicated by Naphta's Jewish descent) the common factor is a fiercely anti-humanist view of society and politics that links the pre-individualistic Christian Middle Ages with the post-individualist dogmas of totalitarianism. The individual counts for nothing, the impersonal collective is all; ruthlessness, whether revolutionary or reactionary, is the only realistic or desirable policy. Leo Naphta would be a caricature if it were not for the fact that such ideologues have been real in our century. Over against him stands, still, the old-fashioned Italian liberal, Lodovico Settembrini. First conceived as decidedly a caricature of Heinrich Mann's politics, he is one no longer. Though intellectually less sharp than Naphta and more often the loser in their convoluted debates, Settembrini is the more sympathetic figure, for Hans Castorp and probably for most readers. Since Castorp is anything but an intellectual, and the debates are often way above his head, he is left deciding the issues less on clear-cut contest points than by gut feeling – not altogether misguidedly either, since intellectual constructs normally have an emotional commitment as their unspoken premiss. Castorp is also shrewd enough to notice how both debaters get tangled in their own concepts, so that their positions are not simply opposed but seem at times internally inconsistent. It all seems to him a grand confusion. Perhaps political issues can never be fully resolved in the abstract? Yet Naphta and Settembrini stand for a real and fundamental antithesis which has underlain much of twentieth-century history. Could there be a humane politics in modern mass societies? Was there any future left in Enlightenment humanism, liberalism and democracy? Or was Naphta's ruthlessness, that is to say totalitarianism of the right or the left, the inevitable shape of things to come?

These were issues of the twenties, far more than of the war years in which the novel first took a political turn. So although it still evokes pre-war European society and ends in 1914, the book published in 1924 resonates with the crisis of the post-war years, the first third of the twentieth century, as Mann later said (XI, 602). No wonder the 'debate' sections stretch

to what many readers find an inordinate length. It is of course a principle of the German 'novel of education', the *Bildungsroman*, that what the educable hero goes through has to be gone through in some detail by the reader too. There is consequently no such thing as a short *Bildungsroman*. In this late essay in the genre, moreover, no detail is gratuitous: any word, idea or motif may recur somewhere in Mann's immense weave bearing a new significance, linked to a new topic, integrated in a larger vision. This is the serious and demanding sense of that seemingly tongue-in-cheek declaration in the novel's preface, that only what is thorough is truly entertaining (III, 10).

That larger vision and the novel's positive answer are contained in Hans Castorp's visionary glimpse of idyllic social harmony. Caught in a snow-storm when out skiing, dazed by the white-out, befuddled by unwise swigs of port and nearly asleep on his feet in an opportune shelter, Castorp 'sees' a sunlit Mediterranean landscape where a community lives in mutual consideration and kindness, but near to a temple where witch-like figures perform a horrific blood-sacrifice. The images are transformations of what Hans Castorp has been hearing debated: Settembrini's life-affirming Enlightenment activism and Naphta's ruthlessness that embraces darkness and death. The 'sun people' (III, 684) in Castorp's vision are living out a balance: neither sunny optimism nor defeatist pessimism, but a humane solidarity informed by their knowledge of the worst, the darkness that always presses us round. The allegory is almost too general to speak to the concerns of any particular time. But behind it is a more topical equation of the 'dominance of death' and the dead hand of the past, the grip of outdated attitudes and allegiances on what should be a responsive living community. When Hans Castorp concludes that he will 'keep faith with death in his heart, but be always aware that allegiance to death and what is past is only evil and misanthropy and a revelling in darkness if it controls our thinking' (III, 686), he is talking about post-war German impulses to live in the past, resentments over lost glories and status, nostalgia for past social forms – attitudes that were blocking acceptance of the new democracy and had somehow to be accommodated if the Republic was to survive.

Given that *The Magic Mountain* is itself a large-scale allegory, and Castorp's snow vision therefore an allegory within an allegory, the reference to current politics may not have been immediately obvious.<sup>10</sup> It was made clearer by Mann's actions and speeches outside the novel's pages, beginning with the pro-Republic speech of 1922 in which he tried to reconcile past German values with the new democratic principle, invoking somewhat incongruously the German Romantic poet and conservative thinker Novalis alongside the American democrat Walt Whitman. More implausibly still,

Mann claimed that the essential beginnings of the present new German state lay in the enthusiasms of August 1914. Even with apter evidence and less far-fetched argument, the whole idea of continuity or reconciliation between old and new, tradition and change, was doomed to failure. Democrats might be prepared to accommodate the German past, but devotees of the past were not prepared to tolerate democracy. Nor, incidentally, were those at the other extreme of the political spectrum, the communists, for whom the new state had not rejected the past enough. The Weimar Republic was thus never an accepted forum for all parties to compete within, but an object of hatred, rejection and subversion to at least two large and hyperactive groups. Politics became ever more polarised, with democracy not even one of the poles but a vulnerable mid-point between them. In 1927 Mann wrote that Western ideas only seemed to have won the war, for there was currently more Naphta about than Settembrini (to Hanns Kreuz, 18 April 1927); and on 1 January 1933 he told another correspondent, Erich Ziebarth, that the Naphtas were now on top. Neither time does he mean the communists; the second occasion, indeed, was the eve of Hitler's coming to power. But the real point about Naphta was never just his communist sympathies; it was the totalitarian essence common to extreme left and right alike, what in *The Magic Mountain* is called 'iron allegiance, discipline, denial of the individual, violation of the personality' and 'the revolution of antihumane backlash' (III, 554, 636).

But we are anticipating. Between Mann's political turn in 1922 and Hitler's accession to power in 1933, Mann was deeply engaged in the unfolding history of his times and in resisting its ever clearer direction towards disaster. The bibliographical record shows for this period 375 items that have direct or indirect political bearing. Very little that Mann wrote at this time did not. Once he had seen that politics was latent in all cultural phenomena, no topic within his range of interests could well lack it. But he also saw the converse, which is a much less commonplace perception: that culture was latent in political phenomena, i.e. that the artistic, psychological, intellectual (or in Weimar Germany's case, *anti*-intellectual, irrationalist) movements within a society were powerful driving forces in politics. With culture and politics both moving to wild extremes, Mann turned to the writers of an earlier, saner German tradition for aid and authority. His literary essays – on Lessing in 1929, on Goethe in the high-profile anniversary year 1932 – draw on historical allies in the struggles of the present. The celebration of Lessing's robust rationality is an implied attack on the 'völkisch' (Nazi fellow-traveller) faction in literary life. The Goethe speeches try to rescue Germany's greatest poet from being exploited by those same people for irrational and nationalistic ends, and to show him instead as a representative



of the liberal bourgeois European civilisation that was now embattled on all sides. Identifying with the great figures of the past was a conscious strategy, and it could be used with conviction because it fitted the conception of myth Mann was developing in *Joseph and his Brothers*: the latecomer consciously repeats the patterns of tribal lore and legend. Like Joseph in his times of tribulation, Mann re-enacted the roles of his great predecessors and felt strengthened by their example.

The intertwining of politics with culture meant that Mann was largely putting his ideas to a bourgeois readership, via themes not overtly political; but increasingly there were overt political occasions too. He became a speaker on Social Democratic platforms and even addressed gatherings of workers (XI, 890–910), which for someone of his background would at that time have been seen as a dramatic descent from the social heights. If he spoke to uneducated audiences in intellectual terms that may have passed them by, he was also capable of calling a political spade a spade. His ‘German Address: An Appeal to Reason’ of 1930 ranged over the material factors of a worsening situation as well as over its cultural-cum-psychological elements. He spoke out directly and forcefully against the rising tide of Nazism, for example in this statement in a Berlin newspaper at the eleventh hour of the crisis in August 1932: ‘The Germany worthy of that name is sick, finally sick of the way, day in, day out, the air we breathe is poisoned by the braggings and threats of the National Socialist press and the half-crazed foamings at the mouth of a so-called Führer screaming for beheadings and hangings, food for crows and nights of long knives’ (XIII, 624). As this protest against a poisoned atmosphere suggests, Mann’s political activity was not divorced from the basic necessities of his work as an artist, which had in any case come increasingly to explore the relations between external and internal world, and especially the dangers to society lurking deep in the individual and communal psyche. Of the pro-Republic speech that started his new direction in 1922, he said quite specifically that it was written ‘from the standpoint of the novel’ (‘aus dem Roman heraus’: to Josef Ponten, 5 February 1925). That is to say, what he later (XI, 423–4) frankly called the ‘result’ of *The Magic Mountain* – purer aesthetes commonly disclaim anything so explicit – was the underlying principle of his politics.

It is important to see this connection, for there has been much facile criticism that Mann was not ‘really’ interested in politics, that it was all an unreal act. On the contrary, it was a real and urgently necessary act. As German politics staggered towards the abyss of the Third Reich, resistance became an increasingly desperate defence of ever more basic values, down to that free atmosphere which literature is not alone in needing. What cannot be argued away, politically or historically, is the fact and force of Mann’s commitment.

He met the obligations that went with being a writer 'who deserves this name not merely for his talent',<sup>11</sup> consciously using the high public profile which his art and his very different first political involvement had given him. He demonstrably did more, spoke up earlier and saw things truer than any other German writer. Inevitably that later rankled with the rest – no one likes to hear 'I told you so' – and German attitudes to Mann's politics ever since have signally failed to do him justice.<sup>12</sup>

All of this does not mean he was a natural politician, and he never claimed to be.<sup>13</sup> In normal times he would have preferred to go on quietly writing novels; but these were not normal times, they were abnormal to the point where the very idea of social normality was threatened with destruction, and with it the possibility of humane literature. The proper distinction is thus not between 'real' literary and 'unreal' political activity, but between a natural inclination and an imperative duty. 'Real', in politics, is what someone publicly says and does; and what Mann said and did was certainly real enough to make exile his only guarantee of safety in 1933. Yet throughout he remained an artist too. It is cause for wonder that he was able to keep up such a rate of writing for a political emergency and also find time and energy – to say nothing of the calm of mind – for literature of the scope and quality of *The Magic Mountain*, or of the *Joseph* sequence that was begun hard on its heels and would later be a vital remnant of his old existence to offset the disorientation of exile.

The unease of living amid Weimar's social turmoil is the subject of a paradoxically relaxed and good-humoured novella, *Disorder and Early Sorrow* (1925), which comes so close to the realities of the Mann family in the twenties as to be almost straight autobiography. Mann makes the father into a professor of history, not a far cry from a novelist who was now consciously analysing the historical process. The past of academic history, though, is a safe haven, especially if the subject is a distant period. Abel Cornelius is an expert on the Spain of Philip II (there are echoes of *Tonio Kröger* here) and for him there is something reassuringly fixed in its pastness. It has finished happening, in contrast to the uneasy present of social change and galloping inflation. Tellingly, the story uses the present tense throughout, which is normally a narrative trick to make us feel that a climactic event is happening before our very eyes. In this case it suggests rather that too much is uncontrollably happening here and now; everything is in flux, there are no longer links with the past that hold.<sup>14</sup> Surrounding turmoil only adds to the usual problems of the generation gap, the bizarre dress-codes and manners and musical fashions of the young. Thus the problem over which *The Magic Mountain* had brooded is translated in this unpretentious vignette to an everyday setting and scale. At that level, it sees things through mildly conservative eyes.

Cornelius, while having (so to speak) Thomas Mann's children, is also partly modelled on Mann's then friend the literary historian Ernst Bertram, an unreconstructed conservative and later a committed Nazi. That, however, still lay in the future. The story stops short of being historically ominous. It offers a slice of life in which no catastrophe happens, except that the Professor's tiny daughter suffers a crush on one of the young-adult party guests. It is an early trauma for her, and a mild one for her father; for what seemed a settled corner of the world, another idyllic retreat (biographically speaking this is the same daughter whose birth was recorded in *A Birth and a Christening*), is on the hazard of history too.

Another family anecdote five years later ends in a real catastrophe. Where *Disorder* sketched a present with roots trailing back into the past, *Mario and the Magician* (1930) describes a present containing seeds of a dark future. It is one of Mann's finest narrative performances, moving deftly from the domestic and trivial to the demonic and tragic, from the heat of an Italian seaside resort to a chilling end where a hypnotist is shot by the young man his performance has humiliated. The story moves just as deftly from the literal to the allegorical, capturing first the beach-level nationalism of an Italy puffed up with fascist pride, then Cipolla's brutal mastery over his audience, a mastery which already exploits the techniques of charismatic control used in larger tyrannies. The story's lessons are political at both levels, right down to the final words with their dual sense: the killing of this violator of human dignity is 'an ending with terror, a most dreadful end. And yet a liberating end – I could not and cannot feel otherwise' (VIII, 711). 'Liberating' ('befreiend') suggests the relief of psychic tension, but its political sense is unmissable. If the linking of literal and allegorical levels anticipates *Doctor Faustus*, that concluding sentence with its reluctant decisiveness points forward to a passage in Mann's post-war diaries where he wishes that some 'fine young man' would shoot the anti-communist witch-hunter and underminer of American democratic freedoms, Senator Joseph McCarthy (2 March 1954). The writer whose position had been reversed in 1922 by violence against democratic politicians could clearly envisage violence as a last resort against tyrants.

Mann sometimes played down the political meaning of *Mario*, perhaps for fear that a piece of creative writing might be thought *merely* political, addressing only the issues of the day with no lasting value beyond.<sup>15</sup> If so, he seriously underrated the story's depth, for it analyses with a light touch fields of force that are permanencies of human nature and society. Yet the thirties did pose a dilemma: was it the writer's prime business to produce polemic born of hatred, or to create art born of understanding? History in the making demanded the first, to help stop civilisation sliding into the fascist abyss. History as record and interpretation demanded the second, at the

latest once fascism was defeated. Indeed, long before then *Mario* was already meeting that demand. The story breathes revulsion, but also fascination. If the audience is in thrall to Cipolla, the narrator is in thrall to his subject, the psychology of demagogic power. Twice he wonders whether he should not have taken his family off when things turned unpleasant, first after the banal incidents at the hotel and on the beach, then in the interval of the fateful performance (VIII, 669, 695). He answers with a rhetorical question: 'Is it right to "up and leave" when life turns alarming and sinister?' And he makes the implied answer explicit: No, you should stay on, for 'that is precisely when there's something to be learned' (669). As the quotation marks make plain, to 'up and leave' means more than just literal departure, and 'staying on' is an ethos, an openness to events in the cause of understanding. There are echoes here of Hans Castorp's Mountain motto, 'placet experiri', which states a positive commitment to experience and experiment. The same idea is central to the essay 'Brother Hitler' of 1939, where to the disquiet of his friends Mann, the leading exile opponent of Nazism, probes the psychology of the failed artist Hitler for common ground between them, and sets the complex motive of analytical 'interest' above the simple emotion of hatred (XII, 846). Beneath these changing formulations, the pursuit of *Erkenntnis* remains the overriding concern.

For although Hitler 'had the great advantage of simplifying the emotions' down to a 'plain and mortal hatred', which meant that 'the years of struggle against him were a morally good time' (XI, 253–4), the hated phenomenon and its causes were not themselves simple. Even while Mann was throwing himself into the struggle, making a long series of broadcasts to Germany for the BBC and criss-crossing the American continent to persuade isolationist audiences that a war against fascism was their business too, he was also pursuing the analysis begun in *Mario*. The Hitler essay picks up very precisely the story's themes. It compares the collective fanaticism of Nazi rallies with the trances and convulsions of primitive tribal dance, which recall the hypnotic states and 'dance orgy' (VIII, 701) induced by Cipolla. The relapse into the primitive is one constant in Mann's account of Nazism. The other is the disquieting neighbourhood of demagoguery and art: Cipolla is a kind of artist; Hitler was a failed one; Hitler's fanatical onslaught on civilised society is compared with Savonarola's (XII, 850), whose vehement will to power expressed Mann's own. Only a radical enquirer and self-critic could have drawn historical and allegorical parallels that were so uncomfortably close to home.

But Mann was not looking for easy comfort. His reckoning with German history became increasingly a reckoning with his own past. The insight that political developments have roots in culture – that what happens on the largest scale in politics will have been felt however obscurely in the

inclinations and temptations of individual artists – made it possible to get a purchase on the German catastrophe by writing yet again about an artist, and one with whom, though Adrian Leverkühn is a composer, there are obvious autobiographical links. This, to superficial observers, seemed one more instance of Mann's endless self-absorption. In fact he was uncovering, under the issues that had absorbed him and been the substance of his work, the ominous tendencies of his age; he was now consciously writing what he called the 'novel of my epoch' (XI, 169). His hero, a highly cerebral artist at the end of intellect's tether and desperate to break through to a new creativity, deliberately infects himself with syphilis. The disease is a legendary heightener of genius (in Maupassant, Hugo Wolf, Nietzsche and others) though at the price of eventual collapse into madness and death. To this modern pathology Mann adds the second meaning of a pact with the devil (hence the novel's title, *Doctor Faustus*). By much the same technique that had half-hidden myth under a realistic surface in *Death in Venice*, he gives the diabolical elements an always plausible garb: the devil may be no more than a figment of the hero's mind, the traditional twenty-four years of the pact are the natural term of the disease. An evil more fundamental than streptococci is nonetheless powerfully suggested.

The combination of disease and devilry was not thought up for the purposes of the 1940s. It went back to an idea from 1904 for a story or an episode in a novel: 'Figure of the syphilitic artist: as Dr Faust who has sold himself to the Devil. The effect of the virus is intoxication, stimulus, inspiration . . . works of genius, the Devil guides his hand. But in the end *the Devil carries him off*: paralysis.' This extreme anecdote – crass in its use of disease, dated in its diabolism, arbitrary in its linkage of the two – got no further at the time. Yet history in the most chilling way had since given substance to those distant beginnings. It was now hardly an exaggerated metaphor to say Germany had sold her soul to an evil power, or that Nazism had been a kind of intoxication and, in the phrase used of the Italians in *Mario*, a 'national disease' (VIII, 667). Beside the extremes of German history, no fiction was any longer extreme. The novel includes within the allegorical structure, where the artist and his Faustian fate stand for Germany, straightforwardly realistic sketches of individuals and social circles whose thinking prefigured Nazism and prepared the climate for its acceptance. Some of these, like the Faustian seed-idea itself, also date back to the first decade of the century: they were materials gathered for Mann's never-written Munich novel 'Maya'. Now at last they could find their place and their point in a larger and more significant scheme than he ever dreamt of.

That is a typical pattern: things that Mann recorded early are seen in their full significance later. History as unintended document becomes history as

considered record. *Tonio Kröger* in 1903 has a political meaning not perceived until the *Reflections* of 1918; the political commitment of 1914 is understood and revised in *The Magic Mountain* of 1924; aspirations captured in *Death in Venice* in 1912 appear from the standpoint of the late thirties as a proto-fascist syndrome; Leverkühn's career in 1947 is indeed a remake of Aschenbach's in 1912, seen now with a fuller consciousness of the problem and shown as a more conscious pursuit of Dionysian release at any price; overall, *Doctor Faustus* gives a clear meaning to the obscure impulses of Mann's self and his society in the early years of the century. At every point the past as he experienced it becomes material for historical judgement, the more authentic because recorded at the time with no set purpose.

Mann's judgements are both subtle and bold. They would not be accepted by all historians, but that is because for conventional history the cultural and psycho-social factors crucial for Mann are intangible and not ultimately demonstrable. That does not mean they were not real. Mann's sense of what was causally significant, the coherence of his overall picture, and its slow growth from experience mean that his analysis stands up well beside what other writers and historians of his time had to say when confronted by the enormity of the Third Reich.<sup>16</sup>

The year 1945 was not an end to history and its discomforts. For a German, relief at the defeat of Nazism was mixed with horror at the German atrocities that now came fully to light. For Mann the exile writer, there was immediate friction and conflict with Germans who rationalised their own self-serving conformism in the twelve-year Reich, begrudged him his exile as if it had been a luxury, and demanded that he now return to Germany to 'help heal wounds', as if nothing but geographical distance separated him from the land and people that had cast him out. Understandably he preferred to stay in California, where he had built a new life as a US citizen. From that vantage-point he looked on dismayed as old patterns seemed to be repeated, denazification was cut short under Adenauer's Restoration, West Germany was re-armed as the front line against the Eastern bloc, and a third world war seemed ever more likely. The passionate anti-fascist could not become a Cold Warrior. He had few illusions about communism, more than once interceding on behalf of victims of communist courts;<sup>17</sup> but he was more deeply disillusioned by the way his new country was betraying its own democratic principles, supporting reactionary regimes abroad and harassing its own citizens at home. That made Mann an anti-anti-communist. In matters German, he expressly recognised no zones (XI, 488). He had thrown the whole weight of his literary prestige into the struggle against Nazism; now he had to balance it on a fine line. At grand anniversaries – Goethe's in 1949, Schiller's in 1955 – he gave his lecture in

both Germanies. Such even-handedness meant Mann was denounced in the United States as a communist, had an FBI file opened on him, and expected at any moment to be summoned before the House Committee on Un-American Activities. (He was probably only saved by his connection with Agnes Meyer, the influential wife of the editor of the *Washington Post*.) As the rabid tendency in the United States grew, he felt strongly drawn back to Europe. Germany remained an impossibility, but Switzerland had been a pre-war haven and was willing to have him back. For the last three years of his life he withdrew to Zürich and, as far as the world would let him, from history.

The Cold War was the last lesson in a lifetime whose engagement with history began late but was then as intensive as any modern writer's has been. Mann never gloried in that engagement or made grand claims for its effectiveness, much less for its profundity. Indeed, his politics was avowedly not a matter of being profound, but of defending the most basic rights and humane decencies by a practical rationality. Even that had been learned the hard way. In 1944 an American correspondent belatedly raked over Mann's aberrations of 1914–18, which were after all, he giped, the work of a mature man of forty. Mann replied that they had sprung nevertheless from 'total political innocence and ignorance' (draft letter to C. B. Boutell, 21 January 1944). As for maturity, that was 'a very relative concept, and a man who has a long road ahead of him and much still to go through is perhaps not wholly mature at forty.' Was he mature even now, at nearly seventy? 'Perhaps maturity takes a whole lifetime, perhaps maturity is ripeness for death.' And he ends with a modest statement about his view of politics, his experience of history: 'I had simply learned something.' It was perhaps not that simple an achievement.

#### NOTES

- 1 Man as 'the sick animal': *GM* III, §13; as 'the animal that has turned out worst, the sickest, the one that has strayed most dangerously from its instincts, yet with all that the *most interesting* animal': *A* 14.
- 2 Alfred Kerr, *Die Welt in Drama*, vol. III: *Das neue Drama* (Berlin, 1917), p. 96.
- 3 The notes are included in Hans Wysling and Paul Scherrer (eds.), *Quellenkritische Studien zum Werk Thomas Manns* (Berne and Munich: Francke, 1967), pp. 123–233.
- 4 That music and painting could be thought of, in 1910, as 'unproblematic' shows how out of touch Thomas Mann was at this stage with the avant-garde. Modernity in music for him still meant Wagner, even Pfitzner, at the extreme Richard Strauss; painting meant the artists who had made socially successful careers in Munich – Stuck, Lenbach – and at the extreme the 'Blaue Reiter'.
- 5 This is the view taken in *Doctor Faustus* by Serenus Zeitblom, who in such judgements on German history is Mann's mouthpiece. The full passage reads: 'Bei einem Volk von der Art des unsrigen ist das Seelische immer das Primäre

- und eigentlich Motivierende; die politische Aktion ist zweiter Ordnung, Reflex, Ausdruck, Instrument.'
- 6 In *Pan* 3 (1913), p. 640.
  - 7 Georg Lukács, *Deutsche Literatur im Zeitalter des Imperialismus* (Berlin: Aufbau, 1945), p. 223.
  - 8 Mann's own phrase for the force that took over from the 'Dionysian overflowing individualistic lyricism' to which the beauty of a Polish boy in Venice first inspired him (letter to Carl Maria Weber, 4 July 1920).
  - 9 The murders of politicians like Rathenau and Matthias Erzberger were only the most high-profile crimes. Between 1919 and 1922, 354 political murders were perpetrated by the Right, and 22 by the Left. See Ian Kershaw, *Hitler 1889-1936: Hubris* (London: Penguin, 1998), pp. 171, 654.
  - 10 Interestingly, Mann's political drift was clear enough to the highly conservative king-maker on the Nobel Prize Committee, Frederik Böök, who made sure that the award to Thomas Mann in 1929 was expressly for *Buddenbrooks* of 1901, not *The Magic Mountain* of 1924.
  - 11 Unpublished review of a Swiss journal ('Anlässlich einer Zeitschrift') in *Essays*, VI, 151.
  - 12 For a critical survey of recent scholarly arguments, see the chapter 'The Real Mann?' in my *Thomas Mann: The Uses of Tradition*, revised and augmented edition (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), pp. 432-43. For the persistence of the cliché 'not really political' at a more popular level, see Joachim Fest's essay 'Thomas Mann: Politik als Selbstentfremdung', in his *Die unwissenden Magier* (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 1993), pp. 11-69. Fest rehearses the standard prejudice without providing relevant evidence. He argues the thesis of Mann's ironic non-involvement wholly from his fiction, which begs the question of the nature of his politics. The claim that Mann remained 'essentially' uncommitted is not supported by quotation, much less analysis, of the obvious texts, the speeches and essays – with reason, since any representative quotation from these sources would have proved the contrary. Apart from one vague reference (p. 11) to 'economic and social interests' that Mann was allegedly unaware of (which is also demonstrably untrue) Fest formulates no alternative view on any political subject so as to show where Mann erred. In fact Mann had a sharp eye and sound, principled judgement, as is further shown in his diaries (also ignored by Fest). Mann was not obviously wrong on German irrationalism in the thirties, on the follies of appeasing Hitler after 1933, on the blindness of American isolationism, on the destruction of American values by anti-communism, on the failure of denazification in the Federal Republic; and he spoke clearly and unambiguously on all these things. Fest may seem to carry weight, as a former editor of the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* and author of political biographies (Hitler, Albert Speer); but his charge that Mann was 'ill-informed and out of touch with reality' (p. 14) visibly rebounds on him.
  - 13 Mann makes the distinction himself in the essay *Culture and Socialism* of 1928: he is a politician 'if not in essence, then by an act of will' – 'wenn nicht wesentlich, so doch willentlich' (xii, 640).
  - 14 See Lionel Trilling, 'Disorder and Early Sorrow', in his *Prefaces to the Experience of Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981), pp. 131-5.



- 15 See letter to Bedřich Fučík, 15 April 1932, in *DD* II, 370. Other letters reprinted there somewhat restore the balance.
- 16 For a comparison of Mann's account of German twentieth-century history with the views of influential contemporaries – Bertolt Brecht and the historian Friedrich Meinecke – see my 'Thomas Mann: The Writer as Historian of his Time', *Modern Language Review* 71 (1976), 82–96.
- 17 See 'Briefe in die DDR', in *Fragile Republik. Thomas Mann und Nachkriegsdeutschland*, ed. Stefan Stachorski (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 1999), pp. 162–73.

#### FURTHER READING

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- 'The Steadfast Tin Soldier: Thomas Mann in World Wars I and II', in Reinhold Grimm and Jost Hermand (eds.), *German Reflections of the Two World Wars* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1992), pp. 3–21